

WHAT IS FOLKLIFE?

by LoisJoy Ward

Before you visit the Festival of Kentucky Folklife or use any of the following activities, it is important for your students to know what folklife is as well as other terms and ideas.

Folklife, or folklore, includes the traditions that are shared by a group of people who have a mutual background or interest. Tradition in this case represents views, behaviors, and actions through which group members express themselves. Folklore can be expressed in a variety of ways. These can include jokes, stories, food, art, games, dance, music, yard decorations, and holiday celebrations, just to name a few.

Folklife is both simple and complex. It can include the making of a family-favorite cake for dessert, or an elaborate wedding custom.

Folklife is a dynamic process. There is much more to a quilt or a ghost story than what appears on the surface. What makes them folklife lies not in the items themselves, but in the process and meaning behind them. In other words, it is the person, or groups of people, who quilt in a certain style or who tell a ghost story in a particular way that makes the experience folklife.

The learning process is very important to folklife. Folklife is not learned from books or printed sources. It is usually learned from oral transmission or observation. For example, children usually do not learn how to make paper airplanes from books but from other children. Folklife is learned informally and is usually passed on either verbally or by repetitive demonstration.

Folklorists and those who study folklife try to realize the meaning and function behind a tradition. For example, if you were studying the folk traditions of a boatmaker you would not only look at the process of the building of the boat but what motivates the builder. You could also look

at why he/she uses a certain type of wood, who he/she builds for, why it is important to continue making the boat, and the elements that make it art to the maker and the group.

Often folklife is misunderstood and thought to be simply things that are old and outdated customs. But the fact is, folklife traditions are being created and re-created every day. For example, demolition derby car decorating is a tradition that is shared by families and groups that have a passion for the sport. Students have their own folk traditions which can be seen on the playgrounds and backyards in any city.

Another misconception is that people believe that only "other" people have folklife and folk traditions. The fact is all people have folklife. We all have traditions and activities that we do. These activities can be things like sittin at the same place at the dinner table, eating pizza on Friday nights, or decorating a skateboard.

Another term that needs to be defined is folk group. We all belong to folk groups. Folk groups are people who share common ancestry, ethnicity, customs, behaviors, or interests. One folk group most of us belong to is our family. Families often have special ways in which they celebrate birthdays, holidays, or weekends. Family folklore is probably one of the most accessible folk groups for students to discover their own folklife. In defining family we need to expand our definition beyond the typical "nuclear" family to include extended family and friends of the family.

In knowing what folklife and folk groups are students will be able to understand the purpose for the Festival of Kentucky Folklife and their own folklife. The following activities will help emphasize what they will hear and see. For those not able to be at the festival, it will offer some resources for using folklife in your classroom.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY IDEAS OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE

1. Have students interview a parent, brother, or sister about the traditions associated with their job. Model the interviewing process by inviting a friend to class and conducting an interview for the students. Then work together to develop a list of questions like the ones below. To give students a chance to share their findings, plan a family career day in which the kids present their family members to the class.

Festival Links: Horseshoer; River Workers, Stone Masons

Academic Expectations: 1.1--Accessing sources; 2.36--Career Path

2. When you study the occupations of past eras, identify present-day counterparts in your community. Invite workers to class and interview them about their jobs to find out how the occupation has changed. If there is a business or industry that has been in your area for many years, invite several generations of workers to find out what has changed and what has remained the same. If local field trips are allowed, arrange to visit the workers at their job site.

Festival Links: Horseshoer; River workers, Stone Masons

Academic Expectations: 2.20--Historical perspective

3. If your students prepare career reports or take part in shadowing programs, challenge them to seek occupational folklife as part of their research. Armed with questions like the ones below, they can extend their knowledge of a job beyond the basic facts.

Festival links: Horseshoer; River workers, Stone Masons

Academic Expectations: 1.1--Accessing Sources; 2.36--Career Path

4. Consider including occupational folklife in units on the visual arts. Talk to people who work in local industries to find out if they recycle scrap materials from the plant into handmade objects (e.g., quilts made of scraps from textile plants, coal carvings, etc.). Interview these workers about the origins of their crafts, their aesthetic, and the meaning of their work to their coworkers. Prepare an exhibit combining examples of the crafts with photographs of their makers and quotes from the interviews.

Festival Links: Horseshoers; River Workers, Stone Masons

Academic Expectations: 2.24--Aesthetics; 2.25--Cultural heritage

Sample Interview Questions

- What special skills does your job require that are taught by old-timers to new people?
- How are new workers "broken in"?
- Are there words and phrases associated with your work that an outsider would not understand?
- Can you recall a funny story or joke about your occupation or place of work?
- Does anyone at your work make things out of recycled materials from the factory (or office)?
- How do you and your coworkers celebrate the end of the week, holidays, and other special occasions?